

TITLE: We Watched the Gulf

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~~SECRET~~*Keeping the sea lanes open*

WE WATCHED THE GULF

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Since its inception in 1976, the Priority Exploitation Group (PEG), an organizational component of the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC), has been tasked with the timely and accurate exploitation of satellite imagery in support of national-level indications and warning (I&W), crisis monitoring, tipoff, and current intelligence reporting responsibilities around the clock, seven days a week. This support includes but is not limited to providing imagery-derived intelligence assessments of current or potential threats to the security of the US, her allies by treaty, US military and civilian personnel abroad, and US military, political, and economic interests. In the spring of 1987, however, decisions made by the President and supported in Congress modified PEG's mission, thereby altering not only the lives of 200 Agency, military, and government contract personnel but also the course of US involvement in the Persian Gulf War.

In the past, PEG has provided Joint Chiefs of Staff-directed support for limited periods in those areas which have traditionally been considered tactical and short term in nature, including support to US forces in Lebanon, Grenada, and Panama

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as well as up-to-the-minute assessments of the disaster at Chernobyl. With our emphasis on national-level (non-departmental) analytical support, it came as both a professional and a cultural shock when the US Pacific Command, and, later, the US Central Command (USCENTCOM) charged us with providing direct, daily, tactical support on a continual basis to US Forces that would be at risk in the Persian Gulf. The memories of the *USS Stark*, struck by two Iraqi Exocet missiles in May 1987, were still fresh in everyone's mind.

In conjunction with the Congressionally approved US policy to escort reflagged Kuwaiti tankers in the Persian Gulf, NPIC was tasked in June 1987 to provide immediate, (b)(3)(n) tactical intelligence support to naval forces under the auspices of USCENTCOM, initially as an alert to the Reef Point reconnaissance aircraft, a specially equipped P-3 maritime reconnaissance aircraft that was to precede the reflagged tankers.

Multiple Targets

The major threat to these convoys was assessed to be from the Iranian Silkworm antiship cruise missile sites near the Strait of Hormuz and in the northern Gulf, near Al Faw. Additional threats, which included the mining of international waters and the antishipping attacks by Iranian forces, were no less serious from the 20 or so Iranian naval and air bases, the numerous Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG) small-boat facilities, and the IRG staging sites on the offshore islands and drill rigs.

Approximately 80 Iranian targets were selected as being of primary or secondary interest. No distinctions were made, however, when a threat was perceived from a target which did not happen to be on the "hit list." This concentration of targets in so compact a geographic area routinely required imagery collection of lesser interpretability, usually no better than fair quality, in order to obtain maximum daily coverage. We were frequently forced to analyze a lot of "black blobs" in making life-and-death threat assessments.

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Meeting the Challenge

In July 1987, when our support evolved into direct assistance to the entire Operation Earnest Will (the escorted convoys), we were regularly supplying intelligence assessments within one hour of receipt of imagery. These reports took the form of General Service (Secret-level) messages to USCENTCOM and major field components, including those naval ships on station in the Gulf region. Usually, two messages were produced each night. They supplemented the continuous telephonic communications with USCENTCOM, the National Military Intelligence Center (NMIC), the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Strategic Air Command. These calls provided an immediate alert to impending or potential threats to the convoys.

Another element of support provided by PEG included the transmission of selected imagery scenes through on-site specialized equipment to the CIA's Joint Imagery Liaison Element, which often provided field operators with critical information.

From 1 July 1987 to 30 June 1988, some 70 US-escorted convoys passed through the Strait of Hormuz. In that time, thousands of frames of satellite imagery of the Persian Gulf targets were acquired, 612 Earnest Will cables were issued, and 236 briefing boards on significant intelligence items were produced. These numbers, however, do not take into account the volume of pre-Earnest Will message support, the number of telephone calls to clarify specific USCENTCOM and other questions from Department of Defense elements, or the volume of messages issued on non-Earnest Will-related I&W issues. This tactical support included the near-undivided attention of an average of eight personnel (drawn from a nighttime contingent of 15 imagery analysts) and was accomplished regularly in addition to other national-level reporting requirements.

The Silkworm Threat

While several of the Silkworm sites along the Strait of Hormuz were identified before specific Earnest Will support was required, no fewer than six new sites were identified, targetted, and added to the established reporting procedures over the past year. [REDACTED]

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We were not aware of any convoy passing through the danger zone that day but, given the situation and the all-too-possible lack of complete coordination inherent in any new operation, we issued the message. Later, we found that, while no convoy had passed that day, a US ship was in the threat envelope at the time and that the message was relayed to the correct parties. The ship in question, the crippled *USS Stark*, was being escorted home. [REDACTED]

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The December message and the events leading up to it provide some additional atmospheric. In October, two tankers, the *Sungari* and the *Sea Isle City*, had suffered Silkworm attacks while offshore at the Kuwati oil terminal of Mina al Ahmadi. That time, these ships, as well as most of the Intelligence Community, assumed that they were just beyond the reach of Iran's Chinese-manufactured missiles pointed their way from the captured Iraqi sites and the newly constructed Iranian sites on or near the Faw Peninsula. Drawing on that experience, [REDACTED]

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[redacted] Almost immediately after analyzing the activity, that vital information was passed to USCENTCOM and NMIC. It also was relayed to the Kuwaiti forces on Faylakah Island off Bublyan Island just south of Al Faw. When the missile was launched, it was engaged by SA-8 and HAWK surface-to-air missiles. Although they did not hit the target, the Silkworm itself failed in flight and fell into the sea. At least the warning process had worked.

For a short time, these Silkworm attacks also managed to dissuade the Soviets from using the port of Ash Shuaybah, only a mile or so south of Mina al Ahmadi, for transferring their war cargos bound for Iraq. Suddenly, barriers were rising in front of the petroleum export facilities at Shuaybah, radar reflector barges were being deployed offshore to deflect any more missiles, and air defenses were strengthened. Warning was being heeded.

In February 1988, we were able to provide additional, imagery-derived intelligence that could have had a significant impact on Gulf shipping and that may yet provide a greater margin of safety for mariners confronted by the Silkworm threat. While the simple construction of another Silkworm launch site (even if it was quite a bit more elaborate than the two previous sites) was not especially noteworthy in and of itself, its location was what caught our attention. [redacted]

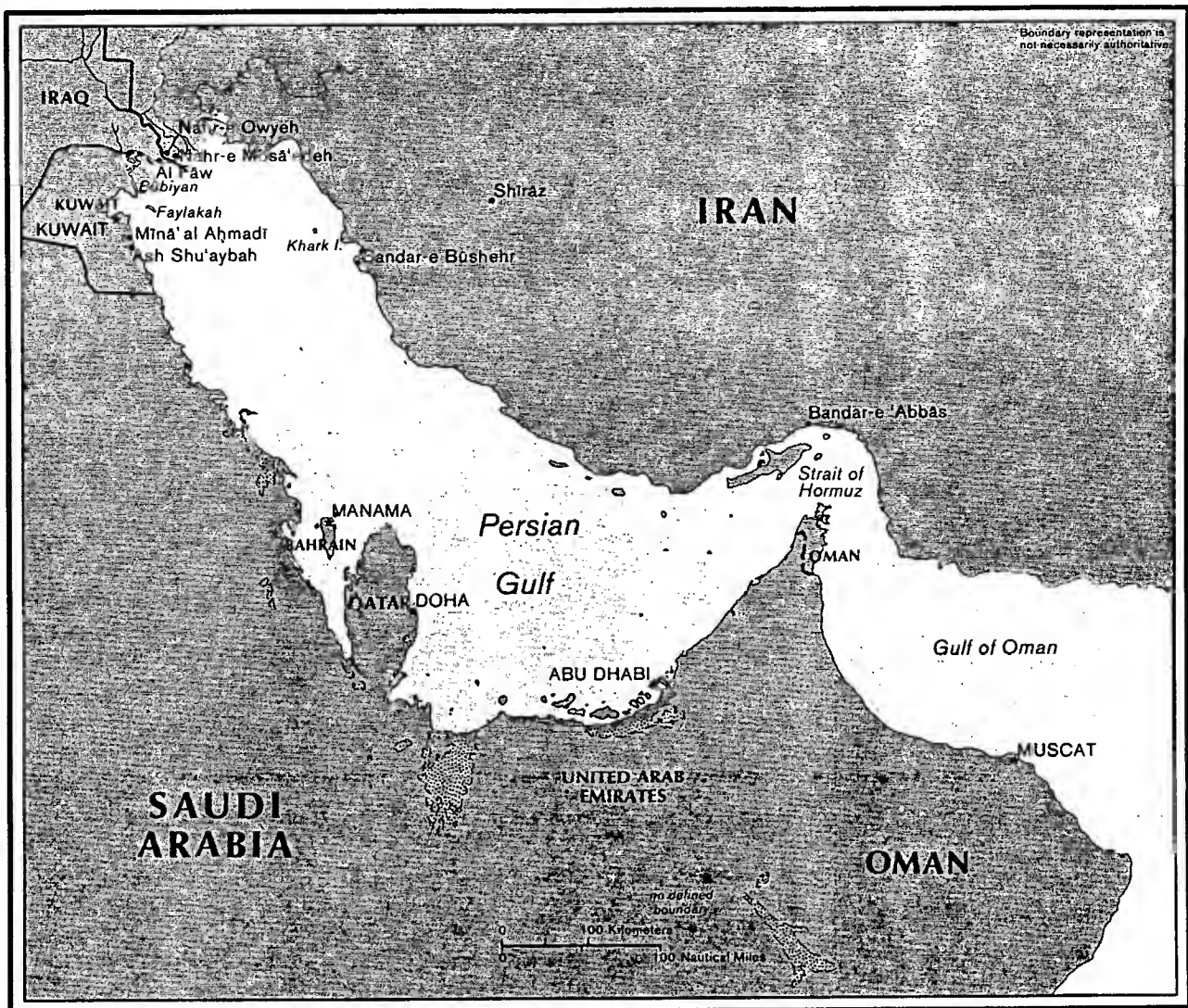
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[redacted] While this specific point was rendered moot by the Iraqi

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offensive and the recapture of the Al Faw area, (b)(1)

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Antimining Operation

Perhaps the most newsworthy and certainly most policy-relevant issue supported by NPIC during the entire crisis was related to the events leading up to the seizure of the Iranian naval (b)(1) ship *Iran Ajr* (b)(3)(n). In September 1987, (b)(3)(n) we provided the initial tipoff, which later formed the basis of the "smoking gun" evidence that had eluded US military and policymaking officials.

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This information was relayed both textually and telephonically to USCENTCOM analysts, and an immediate signals watch was placed on the ship. When she was noted by our forces as being well beyond her normal patrol area off the coast of Bahrain, a specially configured helicopter was deployed from a US frigate. (b)(1)

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the helicopter opened fire and *Iran Ajr* was hit. It subsequently was abandoned, and a SEAL contingent from another ship took it into custody the next morning.

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While the newspapers were full of accounts of initial "P-3 tipoffs" leading up to the seizure, the commanding officer of USCENTCOM stated that this military success and its resultant effect on international opinion was a direct result of NPIC intelligence support. Television films broadcast around the world of the Iranian action provided US policymakers with their most important, best-documented piece of evidence that not even the most brazen denials could quash.

Thwarting Small Boats

A little-touted but equally important contribution to the safety of US and allied personnel in the Gulf revolved around the aborted IRG attack on Saudi offshore oil platforms in October 1987. During the summer and early fall, the IRG small-boat forces, which had continued to harass Gulf shipping, were massing in the northern Persian Gulf. After the summer exercise, (b)(1) many of these small boats—equipped with automatic weapons and (b)(3)(n) capable of launching rocket attacks—remained at IRG bases in the Bandar-e Bushehr and Khark Island areas. Most of the small boats were removed from the water and were inactive for several weeks, until late September and early October, (b)(1) (b)(3)(n)

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(b)(3)(n) The next day's newspaper accounts told of how "... the Royal Saudi Navy turned back an attempted attack on their offshore oil production facilities by as many as 60 of these small craft ..." with no loss of life on either side. Subsequent discussions (b)(1) revealed that the (b)(3)(n)

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These are the most striking examples of the tactical support provided by NPIC. The provision of time-consuming order of battle reports on a daily basis was much more typical of that support. As a result of the assistance rendered by NPIC and by several other intelligence organizations, many of which must remain unheralded, the military commanders charged with the implementation of Operation Earnest Will were able to incorporate the highest-quality intelligence reporting into their successful efforts to keep open international sea lanes in the Persian Gulf.

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